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ABSTRACT

To provide students with the complete education needed for the 21st century, it is important that the liberal arts be fully integrated into professional and technical curricula. Liberal education dominated post-secondary education in the United States up until the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, which made possible the development of comprehensive state universities providing technical instruction. Subsequent changes in emphasis between liberal and technical education have followed general political events, with interest in general education following American involvement in international conflicts and technological education being emphasized during the "space race" of the 1950s. General education programs tend to serve two purposes: to enhance students' intellectual development and provide them with survey courses of various disciplines to aid in career choice. Technical or career programs, however, do not generally reciprocate by considering liberal studies a substantive part of their curricula. Impediments to integrating liberal arts into technical curricula include students' goals, which are more career-oriented than previous generations; pressures on college administrations facing financial pressures to enroll more students; and the tendency of liberal arts programs to offer too many highly specific courses fulfilling general education requirements. To maintain the relevance of general education and provide a more well-rounded educational experience for career-oriented students, the liberal arts sector and professional and technical schools must work together to develop a relevant, pared-down core of general education courses. (Contains 23 references.) (HAA)

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Increasing the Liberal Arts Content of the Professional/Technical Curriculum

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INCREASING THE LIBERAL ARTS CONTENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL CURRICULUM

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The debate over the proper role of higher education in today's society and, more to the point, the proper content of that higher education, continues as this nation and the world approaches the next millennium.

It is no longer necessary to point out that a college degree increases one's earning power over a lifetime by a factor of X. The literature is replete with studies on this topic. Nor is it productive to continue debating the relative value of "gaining an education" as opposed to that of "preparing for a career." These should be viewed as complementary steps along a path to success. As my own institution expresses it,

> your major will help you get a job, but your general education will determine your success on the job and in other areas of life. The major and General Education are parallel and interdependent programs which make up your university education.[1]

While few, if any, dispute the first point, many still contest the second--more specifically, what is the proper content of "general" or "liberal" education in preparation for a career.

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[1] A Student Guide to the General Education Program. (Terre Haute: Indiana State University, 1995).

Administrators, faculty and, especially, students, question the curriculum content of contemporary higher education. This is understandable: administrators, to be crass, want a salable product which will attract and retain students and produce successful and giving alumni; faculty, for the most part, seek not only to train but to educate the undergraduate population; but a majority of students enters post-secondary institutions with career preparation, not an education per se, as the principal goal.

Each of these constituencies has valid concerns and interests. However, these concerns and interests need not be incompatible; indeed, they must not be if today's students are to be provided an opportunity for the more complete education necessary for the 21st century. This paper explores reasons why it is necessary not only to increase the Liberal Arts component of the professional and technical college curriculum but to integrate it within that curriculum. It further examines existing and potential impediments to achieving these objectives. Finally, it seeks to invite discussion, even debate, on the topic.

A Brief Review of the "Conflict"

The history of the conflict in American higher education between the supporters of liberal education and proponents of vocational or technical instruction has been extensively and well documented. For much of its three-plus centuries of existence, the ancient tradition of "classical" or "literary" or "liberal

learning" dominated post-secondary education in this country. As Bowen noted, the particular purpose of such instruction was

> to free the mind, to encourage inquiry, to consider the great moral and social issues, to promote a philosophical cast of mind, to cultivate the arts and literature as sources of humane values, and to foster understanding of the world of science and politics.[2]

However, with the coming of the land-grant institutions in the latter part of the 19th century, American educational philosophy would change.

Described by Thackrey as "one of the most beautifully vague pieces of legislation in the history of education,"[3] the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 provided for both "the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life." In providing for not only the teaching of agricultural and mechanical arts, and "military tactics" (this was, after all, during the Civil War), without excluding other scientific and classical studies, this law made possible the development of comprehensive state universities. These institutions would undertake a dual educational mission, one depicted by Nevins as resembling the partnership of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza:

> They quarreled abominably, but they aided each other more than they knew. It was fortunate that Sancho Panza, the industrial courses,

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[2]Howard R. Bowen, The State of the Nation and the Agenda for Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1982), 79.

[3]Russell I. Thackrey, The Future of the State University (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 8.

> took vigor so slowly. Had these courses been aggressively powerful, they might have crowded classical and scientific work out of some colleges. It is fortunate too that Sancho Panza held tenaciously to his rights, for when the 1880s and 1890s brought a crowd of new social problems, Don Quixote needed help in grasping their importance.[4]

The American educational establishment can be credited with enabling the nation to survive, even prosper, during those domestic periods historians describe as the "industrial revolution" and the "progressive era." However, the United States emerged as a major player on the world stage in the 20th century. During this period, the country and its post-secondary schools have witnessed pendulum swings of educational emphasis, from that of the necessity for more practical instruction to the importance of liberal learning, and back again, as the nation's international role evolved.

Lucas noted that a "rebirth of interest in general education" invariably followed American involvement in international conflict: a first phase of activity on behalf of general education extended from World War I to the end of the Depression; a second such period occurred following World War II, when the country's mood closely resembled that of a quarter-century before.[5]

Similarly, Searle found that international events had a major impact on the focus of the American educational system. After the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957, "there was a crescendo of

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[4]Allan Nevins, The State Universities and Democracy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 64-65.

[5]Christopher J. Lucas, American Higher Education: A History (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 249-50.

what had already been a growing emphasis on science and technology in our educational system."[6] Because the nation was thought to be falling behind in the race for survival, "students found financial incentives and social pressures to acquire a scientific education [and] were force-fed a diet of technology."[7]

Both Lucas and Searle suggested, however, that following the end of student unrest and "collegiate turmoil" in the 1960s, when a period of relative tranquility returned to the campuses of the nation's colleges and universities, American academe was willing to take a fresh look at general education, to consider that a liberal education is indispensable to complete citizenship. In many if not most institutions, the curriculum was reordered accordingly.

While Searle ascribed this development to a general reaction against "our technological civilization" and that type of education, Lucas was more specific: he considered it a remedy for the isolationism that swept the country during the Vietnam War; a moral and ethical response to the Watergate scandal; and an antidote to the "narcissistic self-absorption" characteristic of college students of the 1970s.[8] To a substantial degree, however, this appreciation for liberal education has not continued. Rather, in the post-Vietnam generation, colleges and universities have developed programs designed both to expand educational opportuni-

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[6]John Searle, The Campus War: A Sympathetic Look at the University in Agony (New York: World Publishing, 1971), 179.

[7]Ibid., 180.

[8]Lucas, 267-68.

ties and broaden students' understanding of the contributions of various minority groups to American society and the world community. Such programs are appropriate and the goal laudable. Their development, however, frequently has been alongside but not integrated within the liberal arts. This approach has actually served to undercut the traditional role and importance of liberal learning in today's educational experience.

The Goal of Increased Liberal Education

Today's college students both expect and deserve an education responsive to their needs and career goals. This is the responsibility of the institutions they choose to attend. But it is also the responsibility of those institutions to educate, not only train, those students to meet their broader responsibilities as citizens of the next century. In the view of a former president of the University of Minnesota,

> The problem of present-day undergraduate education, then, is not that it is over-professionalized but that it is under-liberalized. The newer task confronting liberal education is to take full advantage of career motivation, and to permeate professional and vocational education with historical and social perspective, and with ethical meaning an orientation. Surely nothing less can stand sufficient in a democracy whose present and future citizens . . . "must manage civilization in their spare time." Every citizen participates in the shaping of social policy whether he knows it or not. His enlightenment is thus an urgent public concern, for the price of his ignorance may be the destruction of the community.[9]

He was writing in 1960, but his words are no less relevant today.

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[9]James Lewis Morrill, The Ongoing State University (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1960), 19-20.

In order to correct this problem of "under-liberalization," institutions--and the individual schools and colleges within--must overcome resistance to change and come to appreciate the value of a more integrated curriculum. But in doing so, they must regain their focus as to what should constitute a "general education."

"General education" or "liberal studies"--whatever the nomenclature--is not dead, or even dying. Even a cursory review of undergraduate college catalogs shows that today's four-year private and public institutions mandate completion of a "core" of courses for graduation.[10] The core ordinarily ranges from 40 to 50 semester hours, thus comprising from one-third to two-fifths of the usual minimum number of "hours" (most commonly 124) required for a bachelor's degree.

General education programs are designed to serve a twofold purpose in most institutions. Ideally, they can enhance the student's intellectual development in these ways: improving critical thinking and problem-solving skills; nurturing the ability to write and speak clearly and effectively; developing the proficiency to understand the world and one's place in it; and instilling in a person the desire for lifelong learning. More practically, survey courses in various disciplines can aid a student still seeking a career choice.

It is in this second area that the dichotomy between the "liberal" and the "professional/technical" curricula is most

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[10]For reasons discussed in the next section, the extensive content of this "core" found in most institutions often negates the intent of a "general" education.

pronounced. While many general education programs--based in the liberal arts--include survey courses in fields such as business or technology, relatively few professional or technical schools demonstrate reciprocity in their courses of study. To be sure, their students must complete a set of courses required of every student for graduation. But other than exposure to an obligatory smattering of courses in the physical sciences, social studies and humanities, arts and literature, or multi-cultural studies, the professional and technical schools rarely consider "liberal studies" a substantive part of their curricula.

This may well be unfortunate. But it may also be understandable. After all, higher educational institutions are at least, as Bowen expressed it, "partial captives of the prevailing values of society."[11] This helps explain, perhaps even justify, the explosion of cultural-, ethnic-, and gender-based programs designed by curriculum developers in the past quarter-century. However, this also helps explain, perhaps even justifies, why professional/technical schools do not include more liberal arts in their curricula: general education programs, because of the breadth of their content and the complexity of their administration, bear the principal responsibility for their limited role in the "career-oriented" educational approach dominant at the moment.

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[11]Bowen, 79

Impediments to Achieving the Goal

The goal of increasing the liberal arts component of and integrating it more fully in the professional and technical college curricula is both laudable and desirable. However, it must be noted there are realistic and sufficient impediments to achieving this goal that will be difficult to overcome. There are at least three conditions that have contributed to the current preference for professional/technical training at the expense of gaining a liberal education. Students, administrators and faculty, in particular liberal arts faculty, share responsibility.

1. The student factor. Today's post-secondary students are different from those who populated college campuses a generation ago, and they have different wants and needs. Moreover, the bulk of these students are enrolled not at "America's best colleges," but are likely matriculating at institutions ranked at best in the second tier but more probably at those in the third- or fourth-tier as rated in a popular national survey.[12] These institutions, many of which are erstwhile teachers colleges, do not necessarily have the commitment to "liberal education" celebrated by the observers cited here.

Further, many of these institutions are enrolling a significant number of "non-traditional" students, individuals who for one reason or another deferred or interrupted their post-high school education. According to the Associated Press, a recent study, co-

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[12]"America's Best Colleges," U.S. News and World Report, Sept. 16, 1996, 89-123.

sponsored by the Education Resources Institute and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, reports that, as of 1993, the number of persons aged 40 or older enrolled in college was three times that of 1970: 1.6 million compared to 477,000. These older students, 10 percent of the undergraduate population, are not seeking to dance the "varsity drag" or live in an "animal house." They are seeking to be retrained, contemplating a career change, or simply trying to keep up with an increasingly competitive marketplace.[13]

Also, a larger portion of today's college enrollment than many might expect continues to come from families with a limited educational background. To express this another way, there continues to exist a large component of "first generation" college students. Many in both groups also are part-time students, for a variety of reasons: financial situations, being employed full-time, or raising families.

These facts might surprise casual observers who either remember or have heard of the explosion in enrollments following World War II with the aid of the "G. I. Bill" or can recall the surge of college attendance during the Vietnam War era. However, just as a recent television commercial pointed out, "It's not your father's Oldsmobile," today's post-secondary school is not your father's college.

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[13]Laura Meckler (AP), "Older adults flocking to universities to stay competitive, study says," Indianapolis Star, Oct. 17, 1996, A11.

Indeed, the G. I. Bill of 50 years ago may be the underlying impetus in the trend toward a more professional or technical education. The typical veteran who took advantage of government-sponsored educational opportunities sought not a classical education but training to allow him to begin or enhance a career that had been interrupted by his military service. Likewise, those who returned following Vietnam raised legitimate and pertinent questions as to the approach and content of higher education. Today's students, both those entering directly from high school and the non-traditional group, also have doubts about the relevance of a liberal education in their pursuit of a career.

The fact remains, however, for all the relative affordability and availability of a college education, as on 1994 only 22 percent of adults in the United States over the age of 25 possessed at least a bachelor's degree.[14] As Bowen suggested some 15 years ago, students from families with little or no college experience "understandably look to higher education for upward mobility based on good jobs and high pay and tend to elect vocational courses of study."[15] That this appears to be no less true today helps explain the resistance of professional and technical schools to embrace a course of study more grounded in the liberal arts, and of students in general to seek a more "well-rounded" educational experience.

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[14]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1995 (Washington: 1995), 149.

[15]Bowen, 92.

2. The administration factor. Many institutions today are facing financial exigencies; thus they attempt to combat the realities of stagnant or declining enrollments by creating or maintaining curricula and standards designed to attract and retain students. In doing so, they continue to collect the necessary tuitions and fees and, in the case of state-assisted public institutions, meet the formulas for appropriations that increasingly are tied to enrollments. Further, to be successful, administrators at these colleges and universities have found that a more "practical" curriculum is the more practical approach to remaining viable. They are necessarily less than interested in promoting the inclusion of a greater liberal arts component in the more successful "job-placement" or "career-oriented" curricula at the potential cost of losing enrollment.

3. The faculty factor. While the consequences of the two above conditions cannot be ignored or even downplayed, there is a third reason for the current preference for a professional/technical curriculum by both students and administrators. In this instance, the faculty of the liberal arts must be held accountable. Put succinctly, "general education" has become too "specific."

Originally, the concept of general education involved establishing a relatively small core of courses in basic studies--for example, English composition, fundamental mathematics, and oral communication--and "survey" courses in various liberal arts disciplines. Such a program would give students a necessary foundation

not only for pursuing a successful career but also for understanding the world in which he or she lived and functioned, that is, becoming a desirable cohort of informed, responsible, and responsive citizens.

Over the past three decades, however, not only have the post-secondary institutions confronted the realities of stabilized or even declining enrollments, but so too have individual departments, many within the Liberal Arts. They frequently have seized upon General Education as a device for survival: an increased number of "survey" courses can bring in more students, and more student enrollment can enhance the viability of the department(s).

The result has been the creation in many institutions of a general education curriculum which offers a smorgasbord of courses but does not provide a particularly fulfilling menu. The student is confronted with a conglomeration of courses from which to choose, many of which, frankly, are too specific--or advanced--in content to justify inclusion in a general education program. The student may well complete the required number of hours but not receive a well-rounded or a coherent foundation.

Students--as well as advisers--can, and likely will, become confused and disgruntled with such wide-ranging general education curricula. While departments may initially see improved enrollments, an overall trend is for their student populations to become spread thin among a number of offerings rather than concentrated in those courses providing the more traditional--and appropriate--liberal education.

One can argue the professional/technical faculty must share some of the responsibility. Many disciplines in these schools have expanded their major degree requirements, some to 60 or more hours, so that there is relatively little room for inclusion of a larger liberal arts component in their curricula. However, given the plethora of liberal arts courses designated as "general education" in most institutions, the task of deciding which courses would enhance the liberal arts segment of a practical curriculum is at least formidable.

Conclusions

The goals of those who seek to restore, even enhance the role of the liberal arts in the overall educational picture, particularly within the professional/technical curricula, are understandable. Contemporary and future teachers, engineers, scientists, nurses, accountants, etc., need to know not only their fields but also must gain a greater understanding of how their chosen fields have been and likely will be affected by the socio-political world in which they will function. While there is not unanimous agreement,[16] most educational observers have concurred.

Houle and Nelson, for example, maintained that a liberal education was more than relevant to citizenship but, in fact,

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[16]One dissident is Charles J. Sykes, a conservative critic of American higher education in general and the liberal art curriculum in particular. His books, Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1988) and The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1990), were labelled intemperate, muckraking diatribes by the educational establishment, notably Lucas.

> a precondition of the best kind of citizenship, for the liberally educated citizen alone can judge the wisdom of policies, domestic and foreign, by their success in establishing conditions favorable to the pursuit of individual and national purposes.[17]

Searle argued that the purposes of the university consisted of far more than "discovering and broadcasting a set of true propositions" but involved also "the development and deployment of insight and understanding, artistic creativity, aesthetic sensibility, and moral discrimination."[18] Barzun stated flatly that college "is for injecting the necessary dose of the liberal arts into the undergraduate before he enters economic and social life."[19]

Further, as Lucas pointed out, it is obvious the destiny of the United States is linked inexorably with the fate of other peoples around the world; the nation's educational institutions must develop curricula designed to foster a more global perspective and create a larger world consciousness.[20] A liberal arts dean at one of the nation's major state universities agreed:

> Although many contemporary jobs demand an extraordinary level of specialized training, a parallel development is equally important and increasingly visible: professional and corporate America is recognizing that

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[17]Cyril O. Houle and Charles A. Nelson, The University, The Citizen, and World Affairs (Washington: American Council on Education, 1956), 109.

[18]Searle, 224.

[19]Jacques Barzun, The American University: How It Runs, Where It Is Going (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 213.

[20]Lucas, 268

> the traits of adaptability and the skills that serve life-long learning and renewal are of greatest value.[21]

The core elements of the liberal arts, he suggested, are "appropriate for success in the world we see on the horizon."

All this is true, and well and good. However, there are at least two problems here. The first, sadly, is that the university experience most of these observers cherish and promote no longer exists. Even Searle, in his "sympathetic look at the university in agony" during the height of the Vietnam conflict (1971), was forced to admit:

> The system at our major universities is substantially what it was at the end of World War II, though the student body (and the faculty) have changed a great deal in the intervening period. And the point is not that the institutions are old--there is nothing wrong with that--but that they no longer provide the most appropriate ways of educating a student generation which, for reasons that lie outside the university, is quite different from the generation for which the institutions were designed.[22]

He was also concerned that the "real intellectual crisis" was a loss of confidence in the traditional concept of a liberal education without finding anything to replace it.[23] Consider that if Searle found the educational approach inappropriate for a student generation 25 years <u>after</u> World War II, what might he think of applying a similar educational approach for the student generation 25 years <u>after</u> he wrote his book.

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[21]Jesse G. Delia, "LAS: The Professional Degree for the 21st Century," <u>LAS Newsletter</u>, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Summer 1995.

[22]Searle, 173.

[23]Ibid., 175.

Stated bluntly, one cannot realistically hope to present a classical liberal education to an unappreciative and under-prepared student generation, one possibly possessed of less understanding of and more alienated from the intellectual concerns of higher education than any before it. Today's average undergraduate is the product of a "Cliff's Notes culture" which abhors reading; one unable to solve simple mathematics problems without the aid of a handheld calculator; and a person who (admittedly and sadly, much like his parents) makes vital socio-political decisions based on sound bites, snappy slogans, and 30-second television commercials.

The second problem is illustrated by the liberal arts dean who believes the core of his curriculum is appropriate for success in the world that lies on the horizon. The key word here is "core." The liberal arts sector and the professional and technical schools must work together to develop a relevant core of courses, one that will not only maintain the relevance of general education but also provide a more rounded educational experience for the career-oriented student in today's world.

This means downsizing, even "defragmenting," the bloated general education offerings extant at many post-secondary institutions. Esoteric courses and programs should not be placed on "general education life support systems"; they should stand--or fall--on their own. The current salad bar of courses available to students makes it difficult, if not impossible, to develop a continuum of learning that could serve as a firm foundation for one's major, whether professional/technical or in the liberal arts.

As such, current general education programs may serve as an impediment to rather than as a mechanism for achieving an education.

A reduced yet inclusive set of general education courses, provided by the liberal arts and required by the professional and technical schools, might then become the "two halves of a whole" that educators desire, students deserve, and the 21st century requires.